

FATHERHOOD: A TIME OF JOY AND WONDER

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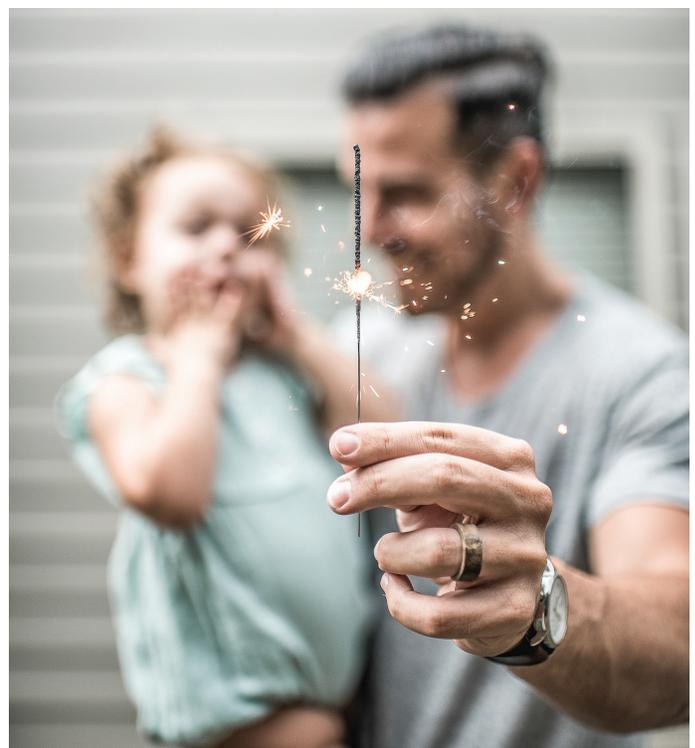
Many things in life come in stages, and fatherhood is one of them. My life as a father began in 1996 with the birth of our first child, Tatiana. The day she came into the world was one of the most glorious days of my life. I experienced a feeling that I never had before, and I gained a perspective that had been absent from my life until that point. I had read about the love of God the Father for His children, but now I was experiencing it firsthand.

Realizing that we are given the gift to co-create with God is extremely humbling. For some, however, and for reasons not always known, fatherhood comes through adoption—the opportunity to offer a child the same care and love as a biological father. The truth is, fatherhood is not simply about having a child; it’s about raising a child in a loving relationship.

A Time to Reflect

For some fathers, there comes a time when they begin to assess their own parenting skills, often comparing themselves to their dads. They also begin to compare and contrast themselves to other fathers. They might reflect on their own childhoods. Some fathers reflect on the wonderful qualities of their dads and strive to imitate them. Others remember how tough it was and promise to never be like their fathers.

As I reflect on my relationship with my dad, I realize there are things that I admire and want to emulate. He was a hard worker, committed to providing for his family and dedicated to seeing that his three children received a good education. Conversely, there are other things that I’ve worked hard to improve upon. Ideally, as dads we are working to do a little bit better than our fathers, and we hope that our sons will do a little bit better than us. With the grace of God, each generation will improve upon the previous one.



A Time of Doubt

My experience over the years as a priest, a marriage and family therapist and a parenting coach is that many fathers doubt their parenting effectiveness from time to time. And one particular father comes to mind.

With tears in his eyes he told me, “I’m not a good father. I don’t feel I’m doing a good job. I’m not home that much. I’m impatient with my kids, and I don’t feel like I connect with them.” Emotionally, this man was broken. He shared with me that his father wasn’t a very good example, and consequently, he wasn’t able to give to his kids what he himself never received as a child.

It was obvious this dad was struggling and dealing with a lot of guilt. I challenged him and asked, “Do you feel you’re doing a little bit better of a job than your dad?”

“For sure!” He replied.

“Do you think you can improve a little more?”

“Yes, but I need help.”

We talked about some simple ways to connect more deeply and communicate more effectively and patiently with his children and how to apply them to improve his relationship with them.

As we continued to meet week after week, his doubts and concerns over not being “good enough” slowly began to fade. He began developing confidence in his parenting skills, especially upon seeing positive results. As he made sure to be home each night for dinner, read to his children at bedtime and play with them, the children responded by soaking up all that he was able to offer them.

A strong desire to grow as a parent and learn practical parenting and child development skills, and—most of all—asking God to help him love more deeply were the winning ingredients for this father who wanted to change in order to have a better relationship with his kids.

A Time of Growth

Nobody is born with all the skills needed to win a Father of the Year award. We grow into the role through intentional efforts.

FOUR WAYS TO CONNECT MORE DEEPLY WITH OUR CHILDREN

- **Spend more time together:** This can mean talking, playing, laughing, dancing, whatever! Just spend more time eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart.
- **Really listen to them:** Often as parents, when we “listen” to our children we aren’t actually listening, but rather we are planning our response. Listening requires us to be fully present with our minds and hearts, trying to understand our children’s world.
- **Discipline rather than punish:** The word “discipline” shares its root with the word “disciple”—one who is a student or pupil. We should look at our children as learners. This doesn’t mean we don’t set clear consequences, but all behavior challenges should be considered opportunities for our children’s growth and our own growth as fathers.
- **Pray for them:** “You don’t need to say a lot to children. Words hammer at the ears, but prayer goes to the heart. Prayer is required, with faith and without anxiety, along with a good example.” – St. Porphyrios



For some men, it may seem more natural to parent effectively because they had great fathers or father figures who gave them wonderful examples.

Others had completely different experiences, growing up in homes where their dads were abusive, home but not actually present or absent altogether. Still, I've met men who were raised in diminished home environments, and yet they have become excellent fathers because they were intent on being good fathers.

When a man is from a home where there was minimal healthy emotional connection, one of the most important elements for healing and growth to occur is to identify the roadblocks that he created to emotionally protect himself and that are now preventing healthy interpersonal relationships from developing. Such roadblocks develop over time during younger years in order to cope with the painful relational experiences.

A man who grows up in a home where the father is disconnected, abusive or physically absent is left wounded, and, to be sure, the wound just doesn't disappear over time. Similarly, when a man becomes a father himself, if he hasn't identified those wounds and worked through the pain of those experiences, he will parent from that wounded state.

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One father once told me, "I had no idea that raising children would bring so much stuff up in me, but I'm grateful because I could never heal from a wound I didn't know existed. I never thought having kids would lead to my own healing and help me grow into being a better father."

A Time of Thanksgiving

It's easy to be thankful when we feel blessed and when we experience good things in life. It's difficult, however, to have the same depth of gratitude when we experience challenges. We're not adept at glorifying God when we're suffering.

HEALING OLD WOUNDS

Wounds from childhood can impact our parenting and our lives in general. Our instinct might be to pretend they don't exist, but this can cause greater issues internally and in our relationships. It is important to seek help to try and tend to these wounds. Begin with prayer and reach out to a priest for guidance. If more counsel is needed, see if your parish priest can refer you to a counselor in your area to help you navigate the process. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 50:12).

Even though God has given us the example of Job, we still find it hard connecting the mercy and love of God with our suffering. We have a difficult time seeing anything positive in suffering. Job, however, never separated the mercy and justice of God from his misfortunes. He gave thanks to God and didn't waver in his faith and was able to give thanks to God through the duration of his suffering. I say this because there are many opportunities for us as fathers to convert what we believe to be difficult or doubtful times into something that God is allowing for the purpose of our own healing and growth. Fatherhood is filled with them. Though we see ourselves as givers, providing for our children, we are more often the recipients of God's grace if we care to notice. I can say without hesitation that I have learned more from my children than what I've taught them over the years.

After twenty-one years of being a father, I still find myself doing all that I've written about. I continue to experience joy and wonder, reflect on my own parenting, reflect on how I was parented by my dad, doubt my effectiveness and grow as God works on me through my children. The stages of fatherhood for me have not been linear as much as they've been cyclical. As I stand back and look at my role as a father, and as you look at yours, I hope that we will all be able to say, "By the grace of God, I'm doing just a little bit better than my father, and with God's help, our children will do a little bit better than us."

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